

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Issue

JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

January 2015, Volume 26, Number 1 \$13.00



Is Democracy in Decline?

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THE WEIGHT OF GEOPOLITICS

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Politics follows geopolitics, or so it has often seemed throughout history. When the Athenian democracy's empire rose in the fifth century B.C.E., the number of Greek city-states ruled by democrats proliferated; Sparta's power was reflected in the spread of Spartan-style oligarchies. When the Soviet Union's power rose in the early Cold War years, communism spread. In the later Cold War years, when the United States and Western Europe gained the advantage and ultimately triumphed, democracies proliferated and communism collapsed. Was this all just the outcome of the battle of ideas, as Francis Fukuyama and others argue, with the better idea of liberal capitalism triumphing over the worse ideas of communism and fascism? Or did liberal ideas triumph in part because of real battles and shifts that occurred less in the realm of thought than in the realm of power?

These are relevant questions again. We live in a time when democratic nations are in retreat in the realm of geopolitics, and when democracy itself is also in retreat. The latter phenomenon has been well documented by Freedom House, which has recorded declines in freedom in the world for nine straight years. At the level of geopolitics, the shifting tectonic plates have yet to produce a seismic rearrangement of power, but rumblings are audible. The United States has been in a state of retrenchment since President Barack Obama took office in 2009. The democratic nations of Europe, which some might have expected to pick up the slack, have instead turned inward and all but abandoned earlier dreams of reshaping the international system in their image. As for such rising democracies as Brazil, India, Turkey, and South Africa, they are neither rising as fast as once anticipated

nor yet behaving as democracies in world affairs. Their focus remains narrow and regional. Their national identities remain shaped by post-colonial and nonaligned sensibilities—by old but carefully nursed resentments—which lead them, for instance, to shield rather than condemn autocratic Russia’s invasion of democratic Ukraine, or, in the case of Brazil, to prefer the company of Venezuelan dictators to that of North American democratic presidents.

Meanwhile, insofar as there is energy in the international system, it comes from the great-power autocracies, China and Russia, and from would-be theocrats pursuing their dream of a new caliphate in the Middle East. For all their many problems and weaknesses, it is still these autocracies and these aspiring religious totalitarians that push forward while the democracies draw back, that act while the democracies react, and that seem increasingly unleashed while the democracies feel increasingly constrained.

It should not be surprising that one of the side effects of these circumstances has been the weakening and in some cases collapse of democracy in those places where it was newest and weakest. Geopolitical shifts among the reigning great powers, often but not always the result of wars, can have significant effects on the domestic politics of the smaller and weaker nations of the world. Global democratizing trends have been stopped and reversed before.

Consider the interwar years. In 1920, when the number of democracies in the world had doubled in the aftermath of the First World War, contemporaries such as the British historian James Bryce believed that they were witnessing “a natural trend, due to a general law of social progress.”¹ Yet almost immediately the new democracies in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland began to fall. Europe’s democratic great powers, France and Britain, were suffering the effects of the recent devastating war, while the one rich and healthy democratic power, the United States, had retreated to the safety of its distant shores. In the vacuum came Mussolini’s rise to power in Italy in 1922, the crumbling of Germany’s Weimar Republic, and the broader triumph of European fascism. Greek democracy fell in 1936. Spanish democracy fell to Franco that same year. Military coups overthrew democratic governments in Portugal, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. Japan’s shaky democracy succumbed to military rule and then to a form of fascism.

Across three continents, fragile democracies gave way to authoritarian forces exploiting the vulnerabilities of the democratic system, while other democracies fell prey to the worldwide economic depression. There was a ripple effect, too—the success of fascism in one country strengthened similar movements elsewhere, sometimes directly. Spanish fascists received military assistance from the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. The result was that by 1939 the democratic gains of the previous forty years had been wiped out.

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democracies had been overthrown. The very idea of democracy had been “discredited,” as John A. Hobson observed.² Democracy’s aura of inevitability vanished as great numbers of people rejected the idea that it was a better form of government. Human beings, after all, do not yearn only for freedom, autonomy, individuality, and recognition. Especially in times of difficulty, they yearn also for comfort, security, order, and, importantly, a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something that submerges autonomy

and individuality—all of which autocracies can sometimes provide, or at least appear to provide, better than democracies.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the fascist governments looked stronger, more energetic and efficient, and more capable of providing reassurance in troubled times. They appealed effectively to nationalist, ethnic, and tribal sentiments. The many weaknesses of Germany’s Weimar democracy, inadequately supported by the democratic great powers, and of the fragile and short-lived democracies of Italy and Spain made their people susceptible to the appeals of the Nazis, Mussolini, and Franco, just as the weaknesses of Russian democracy in the 1990s made a more authoritarian government under Vladimir Putin attractive to many Russians. People tend to follow winners, and between the wars the democratic-capitalist countries looked weak and in retreat compared with the apparently vigorous fascist regimes and with Stalin’s Soviet Union.

It took a second world war and another military victory by the Allied democracies (plus the Soviet Union) to reverse the trend again. The United States imposed democracy by force and through prolonged occupations in West Germany, Italy, Japan, Austria, and South Korea. With the victory of the democracies and the discrediting of fascism—chiefly on the battlefield—many other countries followed suit. Greece and Turkey both moved in a democratic direction, as did Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia. Some of the new nations born as Europe shed its colonies also experimented with democratic government, the most prominent example being India. By 1950, the number of democracies had grown to between twenty and thirty, and they governed close to 40 percent of the world’s population.

Was this the victory of an idea or the victory of arms? Was it the product of an inevitable human evolution or, as Samuel P. Huntington

later observed, of “historically discrete events”?³ We would prefer to believe the former, but evidence suggests the latter, for it turned out that even the great wave of democracy following World War II was not irreversible. Another “reverse wave” hit from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Ecuador, South Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Greece all fell back under authoritarian rule. In Africa, Nigeria was the most prominent of the newly decolonized nations where democracy failed. By 1975, more than three-dozen governments around the world had been installed by military coups.⁴ Few spoke of democracy’s inevitability in the 1970s or even in the early 1980s. As late as 1984, Huntington himself believed that “the limits of democratic development in the world” had been reached, noting the “unreceptivity to democracy of several major cultural traditions,” as well as “the substantial power of antidemocratic governments (particularly the Soviet Union).”⁵

But then, unexpectedly, came the “third wave.” From the mid-1970s through the early 1990s, the number of democracies in the world rose to an astonishing 120, representing well over half the world’s population. What explained the prolonged success of democratization over the last quarter of the twentieth century? It could not have been merely the steady rise of the global economy and the general yearning for freedom, autonomy, and recognition. Neither economic growth nor human yearnings had prevented the democratic reversals of the 1960s and early 1970s. Until the third wave, many nations around the world careened back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism in a cyclical, almost predictable manner. What was most notable about the third wave was that this cyclical alternation between democracy and autocracy was interrupted. Nations moved into a democratic phase and stayed there. But why?

The International Climate Improves

The answer is related to the configuration of power and ideas in the world. The international climate from the mid-1970s onward was simply more hospitable to democracies and more challenging to autocratic governments than had been the case in past eras. In his study, Huntington emphasized the change, following the Second Vatican Council, in the Catholic Church’s doctrine regarding order and revolution, which tended to weaken the legitimacy of authoritarian governments in Catholic countries. The growing success and attractiveness of the European Community (EC), meanwhile, had an impact on the internal policies of nations such as Portugal, Greece, and Spain, which sought the economic benefits of membership in the EC and therefore felt pressure to conform to its democratic norms. These norms increasingly became international norms. But they did not appear out of nowhere or as the result of some natural evolution of the human species. As Huntington noted, “The per-

vasiveness of democratic norms rested in large part on the commitment to those norms of the most powerful country in the world.”⁶

The United States, in fact, played a critical role in making the explosion of democracy possible. This was not because U.S. policy makers consistently promoted democracy around the world. They did not. At various times throughout the Cold War, U.S. policy often supported dictatorships as part of the battle against communism or simply out of indifference. It even permitted or was complicit in the overthrow of democratic regimes deemed unreliable—those of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, and Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. At times, U.S. foreign policy was almost hostile to democracy. President Richard Nixon regarded it as “not necessarily the best form of government for people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”⁷

Nor, when the United States did support democracy, was it purely out of fealty to principle. Often it was for strategic reasons. Officials in President Ronald Reagan’s administration came to believe that democratic governments might actually be *better* than autocracies at fending off communist insurgencies, for instance. And often it was popular local demands that compelled the United States to make a choice that it would otherwise have preferred to avoid, between supporting an unpopular and possibly faltering dictatorship and “getting on the side of the people.” Reagan would have preferred to support the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s had he not been confronted by the moral challenge of Filipino “people power.” Rarely if ever did the United States seek a change of regime primarily out of devotion to democratic principles.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, the general inclination of the United States did begin to shift toward a more critical view of dictatorship. The U.S. Congress, led by human-rights advocates, began to condition or cut off U.S. aid to authoritarian allies, which weakened their hold on power. In the Helsinki Accords of 1975, a reference to human-rights issues drew greater attention to the cause of dissidents and other opponents of dictatorship in the Eastern bloc. President Jimmy Carter focused attention on the human-rights abuses of the Soviet Union as well as of right-wing governments in Latin America and elsewhere. The U.S. government’s international information services, including the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, put greater emphasis on democracy and human rights in their programming. The Reagan administration, after first trying to roll back Carter’s human-rights agenda, eventually embraced it and made the promotion of democracy part of its stated (if not always its actual) policy. Even during this period, U.S. policy was far from consistent. Many allied dictatorships, especially in the Middle East, were not only tolerated but actively supported with U.S. economic and military aid. But the net effect of the shift in U.S. policy, joined with the efforts of Europe, was significant.

The third wave began in 1974 in Portugal, where the Carnation Revo-

lution put an end to a half-century of dictatorship. As Larry Diamond notes, this revolution did not just happen. The United States and the European democracies played a key role, making a “heavy investment . . . in support of the democratic parties.”⁸ Over the next decade and a half, the United States used a variety of tools, including direct military intervention, to aid democratic transitions and prevent the undermining of existing fragile democracies all across the globe. In 1978, Carter threatened military action in the Dominican Republic when long-serving president Joaquín Balaguer refused to give up power after losing an election. In 1983, Reagan’s invasion of Grenada restored a democratic government after a military coup. In 1986, the United States threatened military action to prevent Marcos from forcibly annulling an election that he had lost. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush invaded Panama to help install democracy after military strongman Manuel Noriega had annulled his nation’s elections.

Throughout this period, too, the United States used its influence to block military coups in Honduras, Bolivia, El Salvador, Peru, and South Korea. Elsewhere it urged presidents not to try staying in office beyond constitutional limits. Huntington estimated that over the course of about a decade and a half, U.S. support had been “critical to democratization in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, and the Philippines” and was “a contributing factor to democratization in Portugal, Chile, Poland, Korea, Bolivia, and Taiwan.”⁹

Many developments both global and local helped to produce the democratizing trend of the late 1970s and the 1980s, and there might have been a democratic wave even if the United States had not been so influential. The question is whether the wave would have been as large and as lasting. The stable zones of democracy in Europe and Japan proved to be powerful magnets. The liberal free-market and free-trade system increasingly outperformed the stagnating economies of the socialist bloc, especially at the dawn of the information revolution. The greater activism of the United States, together with that of other successful democracies, helped to build a broad, if not universal, consensus that was more sympathetic to democratic forms of government and less sympathetic to authoritarian forms.

Diamond and others have noted how important it was that these “global democratic norms” came to be “reflected in regional and international institutions and agreements as never before.”¹⁰ Those norms had an impact on the internal political processes of countries, making it harder for authoritarians to weather political and economic storms and easier for democratic movements to gain legitimacy. But “norms” are transient as well. In the 1930s, the trendsetting nations were fascist dictatorships. In the 1950s and 1960s, variants of socialism were in vogue. But from the 1970s until recently, the United States and a handful of other democratic powers set the fashion trend. They pushed—some

might even say imposed—democratic principles and embedded them in international institutions and agreements.

Equally important was the role that the United States played in preventing backsliding away from democracy where it had barely taken root. Perhaps the most significant U.S. contribution was simply to prevent military coups against fledgling democratic governments. In a sense, the United States was interfering in what might have been a natural cycle, preventing nations that ordinarily would have been “due” for an authoritarian phase from following the usual pattern. It was not that the United States was exporting democracy everywhere. More often, it played the role of “catcher in the rye”—preventing young democracies from falling off the cliff—in places such as the Philippines, Colombia, and Panama. This helped to give the third wave unprecedented breadth and durability.

Finally, there was the collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the fall of Central and Eastern Europe’s communist regimes and their replacement by democracies. What role the United States played in hastening the Soviet downfall may be in dispute, but surely it played some part, both by containing the Soviet empire militarily and by outperforming it economically and technologically. And at the heart of the struggle were the peoples of the former Warsaw Pact countries themselves. They had long yearned to achieve the liberation of their respective nations from the Soviet Union, which also meant liberation from communism. These peoples wanted to join the rest of Europe, which offered an economic and social model that was even more attractive than that of the United States.

That Central and East Europeans uniformly chose democratic forms of government, however, was not simply the fruit of aspirations for freedom or comfort. It also reflected the desires of these peoples to place themselves under the U.S. security umbrella. The strategic, the economic, the political, and the ideological were thus inseparable. Those nations that wanted to be part of NATO, and later of the European Union, knew that they would stand no chance of admission without democratic credentials. These democratic transitions, which turned the third wave into a democratic tsunami, need not have occurred had the world been configured differently. That a democratic, united, and prosperous Western Europe was even there to exert a powerful magnetic pull on its eastern neighbors was due to U.S. actions after World War II.

The Lost Future of 1848

Contrast the fate of democratic movements in the late twentieth century with that of the liberal revolutions that swept Europe in 1848. Beginning in France, the “Springtime of the Peoples,” as it was known, included liberal reformers and constitutionalists, nationalists, and representatives of the rising middle class as well as radical workers and so-

cialists. In a matter of weeks, they toppled kings and princes and shook thrones in France, Poland, Austria, and Romania, as well as the Italian peninsula and the German principalities. In the end, however, the liberal movements failed, partly because they lacked cohesion, but also because the autocratic powers forcibly crushed them. The Prussian army helped to defeat liberal movements in the German lands, while the Russian czar sent his troops into Romania and Hungary. Tens of thousands of protesters were killed in the streets of Europe. The sword proved mightier than the pen.

It mattered that the more liberal powers, Britain and France, adopted a neutral posture throughout the liberal ferment, even though France's own revolution had sparked and inspired the pan-European movement. The British monarchy and aristocracy were afraid of radicalism at home. Both France and Britain were more concerned with preserving peace among the great powers than with providing assistance to fellow liberals. The preservation of the European balance among the five great powers benefited the forces of counterrevolution everywhere, and the Springtime of the Peoples was suppressed.¹¹ As a result, for several decades the forces of reaction in Europe were strengthened against the forces of liberalism.

Scholars have speculated about how differently Europe and the world might have evolved had the liberal revolutions of 1848 succeeded: How might German history have unfolded had national unification been achieved under a liberal parliamentary system rather than under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck? The "Iron Chancellor" unified the nation not through elections and debates, but through military victories won by the great power of the conservative Prussian army under the Hohenzollern dynasty. As the historian A.J.P. Taylor observed, history reached a turning point in 1848, but Germany "failed to turn."¹² Might Germans have learned a different lesson from the one that Bismarck taught—namely, that "the great questions of the age are not decided by speeches and majority decisions . . . but by blood and iron"?¹³ Yet the international system of the day was not configured in such a way as to encourage liberal and democratic change. The European balance of power in the mid-nineteenth century did not favor democracy, and so it is not surprising that democracy failed to triumph anywhere.¹⁴

We can also speculate about how differently today's world might have evolved without the U.S. role in shaping an international environment favorable to democracy, and how it might evolve should the United States find itself no longer strong enough to play that role. Democratic transitions are not inevitable, even where the conditions may be ripe. Nations may enter a transition zone—economically, socially, and politically—where the probability of moving in a democratic direction increases or decreases. But foreign influences, usually exerted by the reigning great powers, often determine which direction change takes. Strong authoritar-

ian powers willing to support conservative forces against liberal movements can undo what might otherwise have been a “natural” evolution to democracy, just as powerful democratic nations can help liberal forces that, left to their own devices, might otherwise fail.

In the 1980s as in the 1840s, liberal movements arose for their own reasons in different countries, but their success or failure was influenced by the balance of power at the international level. In the era of U.S. predominance, the balance was generally favorable to democracy, which helps to explain why the liberal revolutions of that later era succeeded. Had the United States not been so powerful, there would have been fewer transitions to democracy, and those that occurred might have been short-lived. It might have meant a shallower and more easily reversed third wave.¹⁵

Democracy, Autocracy, and Power

What about today? With the democratic superpower curtailing its global influence, regional powers are setting the tone in their respective regions. Not surprisingly, dictatorships are more common in the environs of Russia, along the borders of China (North Korea, Burma, and Thailand), and in the Middle East, where long dictatorial traditions have so far mostly withstood the challenge of popular uprisings.

But even in regions where democracies remain strong, authoritarians have been able to make a determined stand while their democratic neighbors passively stand by. Thus Hungary’s leaders, in the heart of an indifferent Europe, proclaim their love of illiberalism and crack down on press and political freedoms while the rest of the European Union, supposedly a club for democracies only, looks away. In South America, democracy is engaged in a contest with dictatorship, but an indifferent Brazil looks on, thinking only of trade and of North American imperialism. Meanwhile in Central America, next door to an indifferent Mexico, democracy collapses under the weight of drugs and crime and the resurgence of the *caudillos*. Yet it may be unfair to blame regional powers for not doing what they have never done. Insofar as the shift in the geopolitical equation has affected the fate of democracies worldwide, it is probably the change in the democratic superpower’s behavior that bears most of the responsibility.

If that superpower does not change its course, we are likely to see democracy around the world rolled back further. There is nothing inevitable about democracy. The liberal world order we have been living in these past decades was not bequeathed by “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” It is not the endpoint of human progress.

There are those who would prefer a world order different from the liberal one. Until now, however, they have not been able to have their way, but not because their ideas of governance are impossible to enact.

Who is to say that Putinism in Russia or China's particular brand of authoritarianism will not survive as far into the future as European democracy, which, after all, is less than a century old on most of the continent?

Today, as always, democracy is a fragile flower. It requires constant support, constant tending, and the plucking of weeds and fencing-off of the jungle that threaten it both from within and without.

Autocracy in Russia and China has certainly been around longer than any Western democracy. Indeed, it is autocracy, not democracy, that has been the norm in human history—only in recent decades have the democracies, led by the United States, had the power to shape the world.

Skeptics of U.S. “democracy promotion” have long argued that many of the places where the democratic experiment has been tried over the past few decades are not a natural fit for that form of government, and that the United States has tried to plant democracy in some very infertile soils. Given that democratic gov-

ernments have taken deep root in widely varying circumstances, from impoverished India to “Confucian” East Asia to Islamic Indonesia, we ought to have some modesty about asserting where the soil is right or not right for democracy. Yet it should be clear that the prospects for democracy have been much better under the protection of a liberal world order, supported and defended by a democratic superpower or by a collection of democratic great powers. Today, as always, democracy is a fragile flower. It requires constant support, constant tending, and the plucking of weeds and fencing-off of the jungle that threaten it both from within and without. In the absence of such efforts, the jungle and the weeds may sooner or later come back to reclaim the land.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 17.

2. Quoted in John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 573.

3. Huntington, *Third Wave*, 40.

4. Huntington, *Third Wave*, 21.

5. Samuel P. Huntington, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Summer 1984): 193–218; quoted in Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, 2008), 10.

6. Huntington, *Third Wave*, 47.

7. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 196.

8. Diamond, *Spirit of Democracy*, 5.

9. Huntington, *Third Wave*, 98.

10. Diamond, *Spirit of Democracy*, 13.

11. Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 409.

12. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History Since 1815* (London: Routledge, 2001; orig. publ. 1945), 71.

13. Rapport, *1848*, 401–402.

14. As Huntington paraphrased the findings of Jonathan Sunshine: “External influences in Europe before 1830 were fundamentally antidemocratic and hence held up democratization. Between 1830 and 1930 . . . the external environment was neutral . . . hence democratization proceeded in different countries more or less at the pace set by economic and social development.” Huntington, *Third Wave*, 86.

15. As Huntington observed, “The absence of the United States from the process would have meant fewer and later transitions to democracy.” Huntington, *Third Wave*, 98.